

## The Drought

And now the weather was terribly hot. Hot winds blew and the air was full of red dust. But everyone knew that the hottest weather came before the rain. In September, the rain clouds would gather.

But September came and there were no rain clouds in the sky. At the cattle-posts, far out in the bush, the wells began to dry up.

At first, the men were not worried. The huge, brown Botswana cows were strong. They could live for a long time without food or water. There had been droughts before.

Then they were horrified. The cattle began to drop dead. This had never happened before. Soon hundreds of cattle were dying all over the country.

The cattlemen began to move back to their villages. They walked sadly behind the few starving<sup>39</sup> cattle left alive.

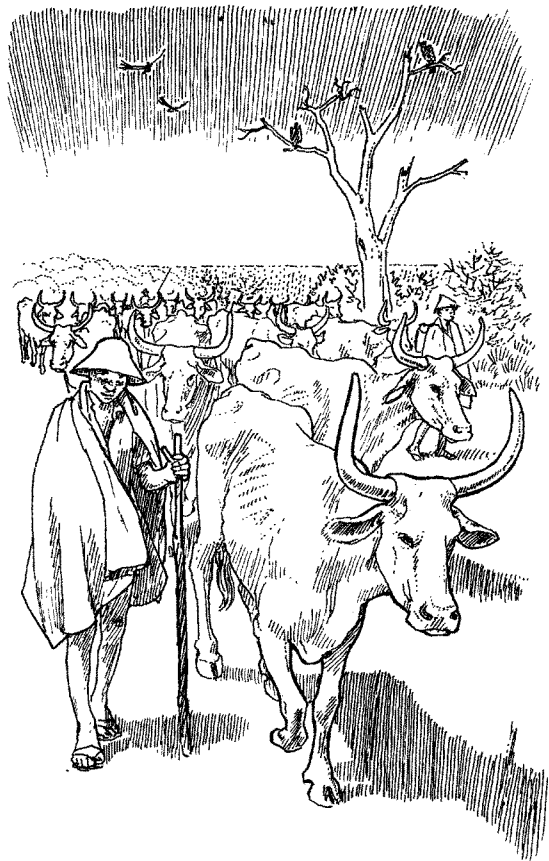
Late one afternoon, the men began to return to Golema Mmidi. They fenced in their few animals with thorn bushes and told the women to get them water. The men sat together in silence. They did not understand what was happening.

When Paulina saw that all the men had come back, she suddenly felt afraid.

'Your cattle-post is near mine,' she said to one of the men. 'Why didn't you bring my son home with you?'

'I told your son to go home two weeks ago,' the man said. 'I thought he was here.'

Paulina was afraid to ask the man any more questions. She



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walked quickly back to her yard. She did not know what to do.

'Oh, Makhaya!' she cried out. 'My son has not come home. He must be ill. Help me!'

'Don't worry, Paulie,' Makhaya said. 'We'll go to the cattle-post tomorrow. We'll bring the boy and the cattle back to the village together. I'll go and tell Gilbert now.'

Paulina's love had brought new hope to Makhaya. But he had not yet told her this.

Makhaya walked to the farm where Gilbert and Dinorego were talking to the cattlemen. They had not met Makhaya before. They looked at his strong, handsome face with interest.

'Do you know what I think?' Gilbert was saying. 'I think this is the best thing that has ever happened to Golema Mmidi. Let me explain.'

'All the cattle we have are here in the village now. We can kill the thinnest ones for meat. We can feed the others here. The government will soon send us food. We'll use the money from the meat to buy more cattle. We'll make another well. Then we can keep the cattle here, near the water.'

The cattlemen were happy with this idea. Now they had a job to do. After they had gone to their huts, Gilbert went on talking to Makhaya and Dinorego.

'In three years' time,' Gilbert said, 'there will be fields of crops all round Golema Mmidi. And these fields will be watered from our own wells. We'll sell fresh fruit and vegetables to the whole country. We'll have good meat, too. And then, there's the tobacco! Why, with enough water, Botswana will be a beautiful garden!'

'You're right,' Makhaya said. 'At the moment, each farmer is poor. But if everyone shared, then every man would be rich.'

Dinorego smiled sadly.

'These ideas are so good,' he said, 'that I'm sorry that I won't live to see them happen. But while I'm alive, I'll help you plan for the future.'

Then Makhaya told Gilbert about Paulina's son.

'I'm going with her to the cattle-post, tomorrow,' Makhaya said. 'Her boy hasn't come home. He may be ill.'

'Mack, if you walk, it'll take you a whole day,' Gilbert told him. 'I'll take you both in the Land Rover tomorrow. I want to see what is happening in the bush.'

Makhaya walked back to Paulina's yard with sadness in his heart. For the first time, he knew that he loved Paulina. He loved her because she was in trouble and she was sad. He knew he must help her.

It was dark. Makhaya knocked at the door of Paulina Sebeso's hut.

'Who is it?' Paulina asked quietly.

'Makhaya.'

Paulina got out of bed and unlocked the door. They stood in the dark.

'Gilbert will take us tomorrow to the cattle-post in his Land Rover,' he told her.

Paulina did not know whether to laugh or cry. She closed her eyes and spoke quietly.

'Makhaya, I am not a cheap woman but I must tell you that I love you.'

'You're not cheap,' Makhaya said. 'You women know more about love than I do. Perhaps I'll find out what love is as we go along together.'

Makhaya was thankful for the darkness as he went with her into the dark hut. For so long his life had been without hope. Now he felt hope and love coming back into his empty life.

## At the Cattle-Post

The next day, Gilbert took Paulina and Makhaya to the cattle-post.

In the bush, everything looked dead. The ground was baked hard by the burning sun.

The only birds they saw were the vultures. The huge, ugly birds had come together to feed on the dead and the dying.

To Gilbert and Makhaya, the things they saw were shocking and terrible. But Paulina had seen things like this before. Now her mind was full of dreams of the future – a future with Makhaya.

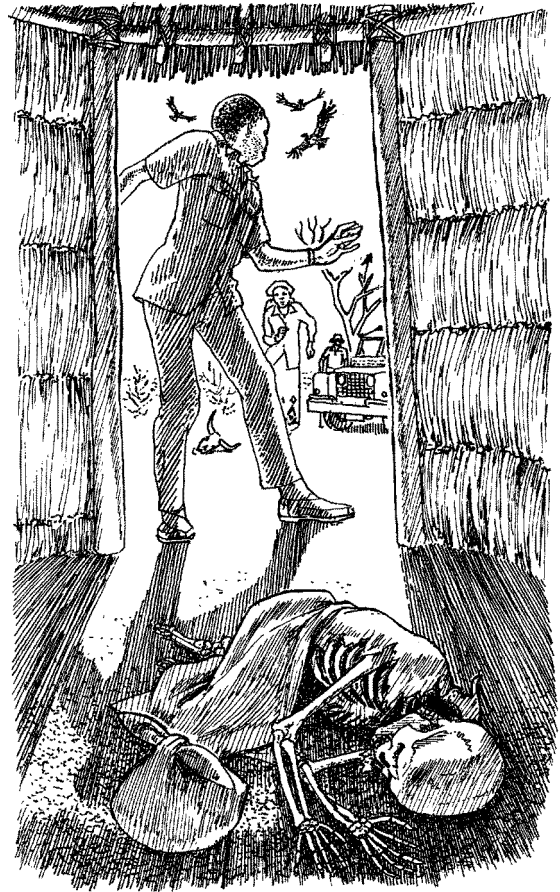
Before they reached the cattle-post, they saw the vultures flying above it. As they drove nearer, they saw Paulina's cattle – all dead. But Paulina still hoped that her son would come out of the hut to greet her.

Gilbert stopped the Land Rover. Paulina jumped down and ran towards the hut. But Makhaya ran past her, pushing her to one side.

Makhaya opened the door of the hut. There was a heap of clean, white bones on the floor. As Paulina came to the door, Makhaya turned and said, 'The boy is dead.'

'I must see the body,' Paulina answered. 'It is our tradition.'

'Forget your tradition. You are my wife now. I am here to help you. Come on.' Makhaya walked back to the car and Paulina followed him.



'The boy is dead.'

'We don't know how the child died,' Makhaya told Gilbert. 'We will have to call the police. Could you take my wife home and tell them? I'll wait here.'

Gilbert helped Paulina into the Land Rover. Makhaya was left alone with the vultures. In his life, Makhaya had learnt to keep away from people's troubles. But now, because he loved Paulina, he could not keep away – he had to help her.

Makhaya went back into the hut. Near the child's bones were some things carefully wrapped in a cloth. Makhaya opened the cloth. Inside, were some beautiful wood carvings. The little boy had made them in the long, lonely hours at the cattle-post. There was a spoon and little birds and animals, all beautifully carved.

Makhaya wrapped up the carvings to take them back to Paulina.

We will have these things in our home, Makhaya thought.

The wind blew hot dust into the air. More vultures came. The empty bush was all around him. This emptiness was terrible to Makhaya. He leant against a tree and closed his eyes.

At about three o'clock, Gilbert returned with George Appleby-Smith and the doctor.

'Poor little fellow,' the doctor said. 'He starved to death. Shall we bury the body here?'

'I'll look after everything,' Makhaya said quickly.

He took a small can of petrol from the Land Rover and walked into the hut. He poured petrol over the heap of bones and lit a match. Soon the bones were burnt to ashes. Makhaya put them in a small tin he had found in the hut. Then he carried the tin and the carvings back to the Land Rover.

It was dark when they reached the village. Everyone knew that Paulina's son was dead. The villagers were sitting in Paulina's yard in silence. Makhaya saw Maria and handed the tin to her.

'Please take this to Paulie,' he said. 'I have burnt the bones of the child.' And he walked slowly back to his own hut, carrying the carvings.

An hour later, Maria brought him food and a cup of tea. Maria smiled as she looked down at the sleeping man. Everyone knew that he had spent last night with Paulina. The women were talking about it. Paulina had not cried for her son's death. Maria knew that Makhaya must go to her.

Maria shook the sleeping man and said, 'Have some food,' in a kind voice.

Makhaya sat up quickly and looked at Maria.

'Today,' he said, 'everything I saw was dying – the cattle, the trees. Will everything die?'

'No,' Maria said, 'not everything. The rivers on the land have dried up, but there are rivers inside us all. Sometimes, when there are no rain clouds in the sky, we find them in our hearts. Then our hearts are full of love.' Then Maria went on quietly, 'Paulina is blaming<sup>40</sup> herself for the death of her child.'

'I knew she would blame herself,' Makhaya answered. 'But I couldn't speak to her with everyone listening.'

'Then come now, Mma-Millipede is alone with her.'

Makhaya stood up as Maria took away the food. He picked up the wood carvings and stepped out of the hut into the quiet night.

Paulina and Mma-Millipede were sitting by a fire. As Makhaya came closer to the fire, Paulina saw him.

'Makhaya!' she cried. 'Where have you been?'

And now, for the first time, her tears fell like summer rain.

'Why are you crying now I am here?' Makhaya said. 'Look, I've brought you something.'

The three of them sat together and looked at the carvings. They talked quietly about the little boy who had made them.

Later, Makhaya walked back with Mma-Millipede to her own hut.

'This is a sad world, my son,' the old woman said.

'Yes, that's true,' Makhaya answered. But as he walked back to Paulina's hut, Makhaya's heart was at peace. In Golema Mmidi, he was beginning to think more clearly. He was living and working with friends in a quiet place. Perhaps that was the most important thing in life.

Makhaya would never forget South Africa. But here, in Botswana, he could live in freedom. Never again would a white man laugh at him or call him "a boy" or "dog".